The King and His Whipping Boy

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The King and His Whipping Boy

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Summary

Someone is spreading treasonous accusations about King Hannibal. There is only one man it could be: his former whipping boy, Will Graham. Hannibal has Will brought before him for punishment, but agrees to show him mercy in exchange for favors. Will begins to take advantage of the situation, and soon finds that he has quite a lot of influence on His Majesty.

Chapter 1

As the sun lowered into the upper corner of the grand window, the glare fell across His Majesty's eyes. He narrowed them and turned away. The steward signaled for a servant to lower the blue-green damask embroidered curtain that was fastened away from the offending pane. That was to be expected. King Hannibal would merely change his facial expression, a simple reaction to some inconvenience registering on his placid face, and someone would remedy it immediately. It had been that way all of his life.

"These particular pamphlets are of a higher priority," a councilmember told him, drawing his attention back to the matter at hand, "For they make defamatory remarks about Your Highness, specifically."

Hannibal shuffled through the offending leaflets, all bearing the stamped sigil of a mongoose lashing out at a cobra. In addition to releasing highly censured arguments for humanism and universal freedom, the writer claimed to be a vigilant voice against government corruption. He was anonymous, of course. Some of his words could warrant charges of treason, followed by beheading, let alone a very long stay in a prison cell.

"He calls himself The Mongoose, and has been printing censored material for years now," the councilman explained, "Speaking out against various social and legal institutions. Now that he has been making personal attacks against Your Eminence, it must be brought to the attention of the highest in the land."

Hannibal looked upon the most libelous section that the councilman pointed out.

"His Majesty, King Hannibal, is a man who takes great pleasure in the infliction of pain upon others. This abhorrent lechery has been present since boyhood. Is it any wonder that he feels no pity for the serfs and peasants who feel the rod upon their flesh for the most minor of infractions?"

Hannibal felt a numbing tingle in his fingertips.

"Outrageous lies," the councilman added. "We have been thoroughly investigating the person responsible for this treachery."

"Present since boyhood…" Hannibal mumbled.

"That was what led us to consider that perhaps this person was someone who knew you as a boy, or was receiving information from someone who cared for Your Majesty as a child. Of course, it is all insidious libel, so it could very well be manufactured without any source for the sake of provoking feelings of ill will against the King."

Hannibal scoured the page once more.

He leaned back in his gilded and upholstered chair and glanced at his steward before reading aloud, "Only those in closest attendance to the King are aware of his perversions, cruel

appetites, and wanton malice."

The steward, a man named Gregor, had worked in service of The King for ten years. He could not help but chuckle, and Hannibal smirked back at him with golden eyes shining.

The councilman scowled at Gregor and asked, "Is treason a laughing matter to you?"

Gregor tried to straighten his face and Hannibal dropped the pamphlet on his desk.

"Be calm, Anderton," he said. "My man here is laughing because he is, in fact, my closest attendant, and this statement is…"

He trailed off.

"Utterly ridiculous," Gregor continued.

In all of the years the steward waited on Hannibal, he had not once seen behavior from him that would appear in any way "lecherous," "perverted," or "wanton." In fact, if he were to be truly honest with assured impunity, he might even call the man a prude. Ten years, and not a single lady-in-waiting or pretty lord had been ushered into his bedchambers. The only person Gregor knew for a fact had seen His Majesty naked was the aged servant who drew his bath. As for pleasure in cruelty, King Hannibal was a stern man who allowed for corporal and capital punishment of his subjects, but he did not appear to enjoy it in any way.

"Ridiculous, of course," Councilman Anderton agreed. "Even so, the subjects do not know His Eminence as well as that and can be easily swayed by these lies. It's important that this… Mongoose… is discovered and punished to the full extent of the law."

There was no one in his service who knew Hannibal as a boy, and he was glad of that. His nurse had died of the pox, and his tutor of some malady of which he wasn't certain, before he had grown. They could not tell anyone of his behavioral problems back then. How he would throw a fit and bite the nurse when he was angry, or of how disrespectful he was during lessons. He had been a very lonely, uncertain child, and lashing out was his only way of coping. His parents had died when he was very young and he was partially raised by his uncle Robert, King Regent until Hannibal came of age. That man also passed away before he emerged from his teens.

According to law, no one was permitted to strike God's anointed, and so Hannibal went unchecked for his disobedience. At his wit's end, Robert sent his own steward out to bring back a boy who would befriend Hannibal, join him in his studies, and serve as the vessel for disciplining the future king.

The boy was an orphan, purchased from a hovel in the city. They cleaned him up and dressed him as a little lord. His name was Will. The steward had selected the face he found most amiable, most pitiable, among the lot. His curly hair, sweet face, and large blue eyes struck him as a viable means of instilling empathy in the young prince.

Will was a few years younger than Hannibal, and his nurse encouraged him to think of the boy as his little brother. He was precociously bright, and despite being raised in illiteracy and

neglect, he soon caught up with the lessons that Hannibal's tutor gave the both of them.

Hannibal remembered the first time Will received a beating on his behalf. He had mocked his tutor, a man named Hoffman who he found rather dim-witted. Hoffman was not really dim, but perhaps not clever enough to school a young man of Prince Hannibal's intellect. Hannibal found him fumbling to explain something that he thought rather simple, and sniped at him in his insolence. The tutor practically shook with embarrassment and indignation. He slapped his book down and walked over to where Will sat in his own desk.

Will stared up at him with wide blue eyes, a questioning expression on his face.

"Will," Hoffman ordered, voice quaking, "Go to my desk and lower your trousers and drawers."

Will looked over at Hannibal, whose mouth was open in a gape. He thought he saw a tiny grin quivering at the corners of his lips. He stood up slowly, and went to the desk.

"Go on now, hurry it up," the tutor told him. He had to do this quickly, or the anger he felt toward the prince would be clouded by pity for the young boy who had to take his punishment.

Will pulled down his pants, revealing his pale backside and lean legs. Hannibal twitched and sat up straighter in his chair. He felt something stirring within him that grew in strength when the tutor pushed Will down over the desk so that the boy was raised up on his tiptoes and his bottom was propped up on the edge.

Will began to tremble and he grabbed hold of the opposite side of the desk. The tutor looked back at Hannibal and noticed the lack of concern or deference on the prince's face. He would have to change that. He pulled a leather strap out of his desk and Will released a small squeak when he saw the thick, heavy implement.

"You are to receive ten with the strap," the tutor announced, "And you will count each one and thank me when it is finished."

The tutor pulled his arm back and cracked the strap against the boy's raised bottom. He cried out and twisted on his toes. Hannibal stared as a wide, pink stripe appeared across Will's cheeks.

"One, Sir!" Will called out, his voice creaking from fear.

The strap fell down again and he lurched forward, beginning to cry. He pressed his legs together and squirmed from the stinging pain.

"Two, Sir!" he said.

Hannibal watched as his tutor beat young Will. He heard the fear and panic in his voice, heard him sob as he tried desperately to say the numbers out loud despite his growing anguish. His soft, young flesh was breaking out in pretty welts, and his legs quivered and

kicked, lifting his bottom up and down against the desk. Hannibal felt a swelling sensation in his groin and a pleasant tingling in his belly.

“Five… oh please, Sir, please!” Will cried. He wriggled and squeezed his eyes shut, tears beading on his long eyelashes and falling down his blushing cheeks.

Hoffman moved faster now, and Will could barely keep up with the counting.

“Six, oh! S-sev… oh please!”

Will’s legs parted and Hannibal could see the boy’s genitals dangling between them. As he squirmed and thrust his bottom in and out against the blows, he could see his little pink hole between spread cheeks. He wanted to push his hand under the desk and press down on the straining bulge in his trousers, but he clasped his book instead and tried not to register what he was feeling on his face.

When the tutor brought down the tenth blow, Will broke out into pitiful sobs. He pressed the side of his face against the desk, still gripping the edge. He brought his legs together and crossed them, still quivering and moving his hips against the burning sensation.

“Thank you, Sir,” he whimpered.

“Stay like that,” the tutor told him, out of breath, “For the remainder of the lesson. It will serve as a reminder to His Highness of what he caused you.”

Hannibal could barely pay attention to his tutor as he continued to lecture him. He kept looking up at the poor boy with the glorious red welts on his backside, bent over in humiliating display. He could hear him sniffling, every now and then releasing a plaintive little sigh. He would situate himself against the hard wood of the desk, sometimes squeezing his legs together, sometimes separating them and raising up more on his toes. At one point, Will brought his hand back and rubbed his tender bottom, pulling a bit on his cheek and spreading himself open so that Hannibal could see…

“Hannibal, are you listening?”

Hannibal turned to look at his tutor, whose face was still red from his outburst.

“Do I need to give Will ten more?” he asked.

Will whined and began to cry again; a small, broken sound that made Hannibal feel like his brain was filling up with tiny, bursting bubbles. He thought of Hoffman advancing on the boy once more, holding him down while he screamed and cried and begged for mercy. It made his cock throb and his head sway a bit. He was afraid, though. He had never felt this way before, and he didn’t want to reveal what was going on with him.

“I’m listening,” he managed to whisper.

No, he would relish what had just happened. And relish it once more when it happened again. It would happen again, he would be sure of that. If the prince was difficult before, he would soon prove to be insufferable.

It came to the point where Will could see in Hannibal's eyes when he was going to act out. It was an amused gleam in his eyes, an ephemeral sneer of his lips. He would look at the prince with his most pleading expression, but that only seemed to excite him more. Hannibal would provoke his nurse or his tutor to punish Will in front of him, and then for the rest of the day he would behave perfectly as if the ceremony had worked.

Hannibal was in a particularly wicked mood one day as the two worked alone on their lesson.

"I was thinking," Hannibal mused, "That instead of finishing this essay, I should write a limerick on the many ways in which Hoff is an imbecile."

"Please don't," Will mumbled. He was still sore from yesterday, when Hannibal had chased his nurse out of the room and his uncle's own steward came in, furious.

"A limerick, what am I thinking?" Hannibal chuckled, throwing a ball up in the air and catching it, "For that I shall have to compose an epic poem!"

"Why do you enjoy seeing them punish me?" Will asked. "Do you hate me so much?"

Hannibal looked at him and cocked his head.

"I don't hate you, dear boy," he said. "In fact, I'm quite fond of you."

He stood up and walked over to where Will sat.

"Stand up, let me see how your marks from last time fare," he instructed. "Then I'll decide if you need fresh ones."

Will glowered at him, but obeyed. He dropped his trousers and Hannibal passed behind him, massaging the bruised skin. He slid a finger between Will's cheeks and the boy gasped and twitched.

Hannibal laughed at the squeaking noise he made.

"Please, be good today," Will begged.

"On one condition," Hannibal said, moving his hand around him and grazing his fingers over Will's lower belly. He grinned when he saw the boy's cock jump a bit. "You play a little game with me."

"What kind of game?" Will asked with a suspicious look.

"It's called," Hannibal said, circling him, "What can Will fit into his mouth?"

Will lowered his eyes and asked, "Can I pull up my pants?"

"No."

Will's eyes flashed but he nodded.

“Open your mouth,” Hannibal ordered.

Will parted his lips as Hannibal guided his fingers between them. He nudged his teeth and pushed them over his tongue.

When he had two fingers well inside of his mouth Hannibal said, “Suck.”

Will closed his lips and began to suck on Hannibal’s fingers. He sighed and batted his eyelashes slowly as he watched an insidious smile creep over Hannibal’s face.

“Good lad,” Hannibal cooed. He pressed his fingers inward until Will began to gag a little. Then he pulled them out and placed both hands on Will’s shoulders.

“Kneel,” he told him.

Will dropped down to his knees. His eyes widened as Hannibal unbuttoned the front of his trousers and pulled out his cock and balls.

“Lick me, right here,” he said, gesturing at his testicles.

Will grimaced, and Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

“Play the game, Will,” he insisted.

Will leaned forward on his knees and hands. Hannibal looked down at the boy’s marked rump as he felt the wet tongue pass over his sensitive flesh.

“Take it into your mouth.”

Will lifted a hand to cup Hannibal’s balls and pulled one of them into his mouth. Hannibal groaned and began to play with Will’s curls.

“Suck,” he ordered again.

Will gently sucked on Hannibal, his teeth grazing the skin of his scrotum.

“Stop.”

Will opened his mouth and Hannibal pulled out of him. He watched as the prince stroked his now very stiff cock.

“Now this,” Hannibal murmured, and guided it toward him.

Will took Hannibal’s cock and sucked on it, eyes turned upward at the prince’s face. Hannibal bit his lower lip and grunted, pushing in and out of Will’s mouth. He reveled in the sounds of Will slurping and the gulping at the back of his throat.

“Very good,” Hannibal purred. “Watch those teeth; open wider.”

Will obliged and his eyes closed, his lashes settling on the tops of his cheeks as he let the prince slide back and forth between his soft lips.

“This is only for today, Will,” Hannibal told him. “You have to do something nice for me every day, if you want to avoid punishment.”

A soft whimper escaped Will’s nose as he opened his eyes again and sucked harder.

Twenty years later, King Hannibal smiled at his councilman. The Mongoose had assumed that Hannibal was the same today as he was when he was a prince, and that he continued to treat other poor souls the same way he had treated his whipping boy long ago. He assumed that his attendants would witness his behavior, know that he was a sadistic pervert, and that there would be plenty of possible suspects as to who wrote the pamphlets. It was a risky assumption, and he had bet wrong. There was only one person living who knew what Hannibal had been like.

“I believe I may know who the Mongoose is,” Hannibal said. Councilman Anderton sat forward in interest. “Look for a man named Graham. Will Graham. Do not punish him outright, bring him to me.”

Chapter 2

Young Will sniffled and pushed his face into the back cushion of the couch. His backside burned and he twitched against the pain. Hoffman had told him to kneel on the couch, pants down, until he returned to check on Hannibal's lesson. He could feel the young prince leering at him from his desk.

A scrape of a chair against the floorboards and Hannibal asked, "Are you very angry with me, Will?"

Will had tried not to cry too loudly during the beating. He knew that Hannibal loved the sound. He shuddered and bit his lip, still trying not to show how much it hurt.

Hannibal gazed at the boy on his knees, back arched forward against the seat, bottom pushed out, legs parted. His skin glowed red against the pale flesh of his thighs and sides of his hips. When he saw Will lurch and shiver at the sound of his voice, he could feel the blissful swelling sensation grow.

"I couldn't resist," he whispered to the boy as he approached.

"Why should I do anything nice for you?" Will sniveled, brushing his wet cheek against the sleeve of his shirt, "If I'm going to be beaten anyway?"

"It could be much worse," Hannibal assured him. He let his cool fingers brush over the hot skin of Will's rear and delighted at how it made him squirm.

"You think they won't catch on to your little game?" Will asked. He couldn't deny that Hannibal's touch felt good on his welts. He closed his eyes and sighed through his nose when he felt a pair of lips press against them.

"I'll just be really, really good for a while," Hannibal promised. "You'll see. They'll congratulate themselves on how effective their method is."

Will grimaced and pulled away from the prince.

"Hold still," Hannibal ordered.

"Why should I?"

"I want to say I'm sorry."

"You're not sorry. That's why the whipping boy method doesn't work on you. You have no…"

He gasped and wiggled when Hannibal grabbed onto his hips and began moving his tongue over his welts, then blowing cold air onto them.

"Let me make it better," he cooed.

Will grasped the back cushion and felt his face and neck go hot and cold. Hannibal was massaging his bottom, pulling his cheeks apart and kissing him directly on the crevice while he rubbed the sting of his marks away. He couldn't contain a soft, quivering exhale. His eyes popped open again when he felt a wet tongue push up against his exposed hole.

"Don't… what are you doing?" he put a hand back to cover himself. Hannibal grabbed it and placed it back on top of the couch.

"Making you feel better," Hannibal murmured. He buried his face between Will's bruised cheeks and ran his tongue over the puckered flesh.

"That feels strange," Will whispered. He felt flashing sensations running up his torso, goose bumps scattering over his arms, and a heavy tugging in his gut and genitals. He whimpered when he felt his young cock begin to stiffen.

Then he felt Hannibal's smooth hand run between his legs and grasp his growing erection. He chirped a bit, and moved forward instinctively. A smirk played at Hannibal's mouth as he continued to lick and kiss Will from behind. He worked his fingers over Will's cock, pulling at it and fondling him until the boy was making the sweetest noises. Perhaps even sweeter, more intoxicating, than the sounds of him screaming and crying.

"Hoff will be back soon," he whimpered, his hips moving involuntarily between Hannibal's probing tongue and his groping fingers.

"Shall I behave myself when he returns?" Hannibal asked, stroking Will and watching with great pleasure as the boy pressed against him with small, yearning thrusts of his hips. "Shall I be contrite? Or shall I be ornery?"

"Oh, please," Will begged. "Please be good."

"Will you play doll for me?"

"Play doll" was what Hannibal called his favorite game. Will had to remove his clothing and lie perfectly still while Hannibal did whatever he wanted to him.

"Yes," Will mumbled. He pulled off his shirt while Hannibal removed the trousers from around his ankles.

"Lie down, on your stomach," he commanded.

Will lay still on the couch as Hannibal went to his desk and pulled out some hand cream. He moaned softly when he felt the cold cream on his sore bottom, let Hannibal part his thighs and spread a thin layer between them.

Hannibal pulled his cock out and pushed it between Will's slick thighs.

"Press your legs together, keep them tight."

Will obeyed and crossed his ankles together as Hannibal rubbed against him. He stared ahead at the embroidered pattern of the armrest, making no sound as the prince used him to rut,

slowly at first and then faster. Will closed his eyes once more as his body moved with the thrusts. He turned his head to the side and looked at the door when he heard it opening. He made no sound.

“What in God’s name?”

Hannibal jumped off of the couch and pushed himself back into his trousers.

Hoffman stood in the doorway for a moment, mouth open and eyes blinking rapidly. Hannibal looked ashamed at first, but his expression petrified into a stony, daring glare. The tutor rushed forward and lifted Will up. He grabbed the trousers from the floor and began to pull them on, snatching his hand away when he touched the pre-cum and lotion between the boy’s legs.

Not a word was spoken in the room. Hoffman dressed Will and then led him away with a firm grip on the boy’s elbow.

King Hannibal’s mind lingered on the memory: the heat of embarrassment, the thudding in his chest, the terrible silence followed by the sound of two pairs of feet marching away down the hallway. The next time he saw young Will was from his chamber window, looking down as the boy was put into a carriage with a trunk of belongings. It was also the last time he saw him.

He didn’t know if his uncle Robert was aware of what had happened. Perhaps it had only been his steward that Hoffman told of the incident. Either way, nothing was said of it, and he felt tense in the King Regent’s presence. Finally, Hannibal resigned himself to impeccable behavior. He believed that if he were good enough, they would bring Will back. They didn’t.

Hannibal leaned over his desk with the Mongoose’s pamphlets in his hands. He felt a moment of pain in his throat. The stinging recollection of childhood loneliness was a lump that he swallowed again and again.

“Your Majesty,” Gregor announced, holding the door open. “Will Graham, as you requested.”

Hannibal stood up suddenly, bumping up against his desk with more force than he intended.

He cleared his throat and said, “Bring him in.”

Hannibal felt the air rush from his lungs as a young man strode into the room. He was strikingly handsome, with the same curly dark hair and challenging, steel blue eyes.

“Leave us,” Hannibal ordered.

Will watched over his shoulder as Gregor left the room. When his eyes returned to Hannibal, the king felt as though they carried with them a cold slap. He couldn’t help but smile.

“Hello, Will,” he said.

“Your majesty,” Will responded, bringing his feet together and bowing with his hand at his midsection.

“Do you understand the charges that have been brought against you?”

Will cocked his head and glanced around the room. A curious glimmer in his eyes caused Hannibal to shift.

“Yes, I understand. I am being censored.”

“You do not deny the accusations? That you are the treasonous author known as The Mongoose?”

“Why are there no councilmembers present? Not even a steward?” Will clicked his tongue. “Wouldn’t this sort of indictment warrant a trial, or at least witnesses?”

Hannibal smirked and dropped the pamphlets on his desk.

“I’m sure if we thoroughly searched your house, tore up the floorboards, perhaps put a few of your consorts to the rack…”

“You don’t need to prove it,” Will replied. “You already know I am he, or you wouldn’t have brought me here.”

“Do you realize the punishment for treasonous libel?”

“The charge of libel only stands if the offending words aren’t true.”

“They aren’t true, Will,” Hannibal told him, his voice soft and his face taking on a patronizing expression.

All the young man could do was scoff and shake his head. He gave Hannibal a communicative glare.

“They may have been true when I was only a boy,” Hannibal went on, “But no longer. That is how I knew it must be you, and only you, who penned these pamphlets.”

“Is that why I am alone here?” Will asked, “Because you don’t want your council or even your attendants to know how you behaved then?”

“You have grown so insolent,” Hannibal remarked in wonder. “Answer the question. Do you realize the punishment?”

“For treason?” Will asked. “I believe it is the removal of my head.”

“Let’s forego treason,” Hannibal mused, moving away from his desk and toward the man, “What of publication of censored materials?”

Will swallowed.

“Five years in prison, and a scourge.”

“A public… scourge,” Hannibal corrected. “You will be stripped naked, tied to a post in front of an on looking crowd, and flogged until you can’t stand on your own legs. Then prison.”

Will turned his face to one side and bit his lip. Hannibal noticed the tension in his body, the trembling of his shoulders and the muscles in his neck. He moved closer.

“I imagine you would enjoy that,” the young man said, his voice creaking.

“I would,” Hannibal murmured.

Will twitched and turned his face back to Hannibal, his eyes brimming with resentment.

“Then let’s get on with it,” he said. “Bring in your council and stamp your papers and let’s have it.”

Hannibal revealed a momentary glimpse of disappointment, and Will caught it. A cat-like grin moved over his lips and he tossed his curly head impudently.

“You aren’t afraid that they will know you were naughty as a child,” he said in a velvety purr. “You’re afraid they will know you are still very much the same.”

“How dare you,” Hannibal remarked, but it lacked conviction. He had hoped that Will would fall to his knees and beg him for mercy, that he could relish in the vision of this beauty cowering in fear before him. Still, there was something about his swagger, his disregard for authority, and his utter contempt for him that the king found fascinating.

“Tell me what you want of me,” Will said.

“Allow me to punish you myself, in this room, and I will drop the charges.”

“That is very gracious of you, Your Highness.”

“It is. I suggest that you show me some deference.”

Will lowered his head and bowed once more. Hannibal felt his nostrils flare and his chest heave as he watched those blue eyes turn upward at him.

“How would Your Majesty see fit to punish me?”

Hannibal turned back to the desk and opened a drawer. He pulled out a thick, heavy leather strap. Will’s eyes grew wide for a second and then a small smirk appeared at one corner of his mouth, dimpling his cheek.

“Is that?”

“Hoffman’s,” Hannibal said. “Yes, I kept it.”

Hannibal watched as Will shifted his weight from one leg to the other, and clasped his hands in front of him.

“Does it bring back memories?” he asked.

Will nodded.

“Some of the most unpleasant of my childhood.”

“Take off your clothes,” Hannibal instructed.

Will unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it away. Hannibal studied his body; the sharp angles of his collarbone, his lean torso, and the sinews of his pelvis. As Will lowered his shoes, trousers, and his drawers, Hannibal gazed at his lovely adult form. He took in the dark curls of his pubic hair and the soft flesh of his cock, his sturdy thighs.

“Where do you want me?” Will asked. He was keenly aware of Hannibal’s gaze upon him once more, as it always was when he was a boy.

Hannibal gestured to the couch, and Will slowly lifted himself up unto it, on his knees. He gripped the back of the seat and leaned forward, spreading his legs slightly and pushing out his backside. Hannibal admired the way his shoulder blades moved as he arched his back, loved the curve of his spine and the round shape of his ass.

“I want you to count each stroke, just as you used to,” he told him.

Will sighed, nodded, and licked his lips. His eyelashes batted slowly as he readied himself.

The strap snapped across his rump with a satisfying sound. Will growled and clutched the backrest.

“One, Your Majesty,” he said.

Hannibal dropped his hand to stroke the red welt that he had brought out on Will’s bottom.

“Just Sir,” he insisted.

“One, Sir,” Will replied.

He hit him with the strap again, and again, listening for the change in Will’s voice, going from deep and controlled to higher and shuddering. His back curved even more, his ass rose and fell with each stroke. Hannibal felt his trousers grow tight and he looked to see Will’s cock, hanging between his legs, was beginning to stiffen as well. Will saw him looking and lowered his head to the backrest, his mouth open.

“Ten, Sir,” he whimpered.

Hannibal continued until Will was red and bruised. He couldn’t expect the young man to break down and cry like he did when he was a boy, but reveled in the desperate sounds he was trying to stifle. The quivering breathing and the trembling in his legs as each stroke burned his skin.

“Now thank me,” Hannibal snarled, dropping the strap on the couch. He moved his fingers over the skin of Will’s ass, roughened and warm from the beating.

“Thank you, Sir,” Will whispered. He released a plaintive moan when Hannibal began to massage his sore flesh. He glanced back over his shoulder and watched the king’s lecherous expression as he spread his cheeks apart and worked his fingers over the crevice.

“What now, Your Majesty?” he asked. “Am I to be your doll this time?”

Hannibal growled and dug his fingernails into Will’s rosy bottom. Will squirmed and moaned again, and Hannibal pressed his groin up against him. Will pushed back against the bulge. Hannibal released his grip and stalked away toward the desk. He brought out some hand cream and took it back to Will, who saw it and chuckled. He sighed when the cold cream was applied to his sores.

Hannibal massaged the lotion over the welts, deepening the color and making the skin shine. He slicked a layer over Will’s thighs, grazing the man’s testicles with his thumb. Will grunted and spread his legs further apart. Hannibal pulled out his cock and slid it over the crack of his ass, between his cheeks and thighs.

“Push your legs together,” he instructed.

Will closed his thighs around Hannibal’s cock and bent lower toward the back of the couch. His back curved, jutting out his shoulder-blades and tilting his hips into the movements.

Hannibal thrust between Will’s legs, hot shame filling his face and chest. He had recreated a moment from his boyhood, and he would find release this time. Will knew what he was, and he couldn’t control himself. There was something delicious about feeling ashamed, though. He could see his whipping boy’s eyes gleaming as he gazed back at him, moving forward slightly with each pump of Hannibal’s hips. No one in the world knew him so well.

He came to orgasm, his sticky seed trickling between Will’s thighs. Will sniffed and looked forward, and Hannibal wondered what thoughts were in his mind. He pulled away quickly and pushed himself back inside of his trousers.

Will parted his legs and let the cum drip down them. He lay his head to one side and peered back over his shoulder.

“And now, Your Majesty?” he asked.

“Get dressed,” the king answered, his face blushing.

Will got up slowly, and sauntered toward his clothing hung over the chair. He let his hips sway and he didn’t wipe away the cum from his legs as he got dressed. He faced the king with an impish tilt of his head.

“Publish no more of these tracts,” Hannibal ordered. “Or I will have no choice to have you arrested, in earnest this time.”

“Yes, Your Eminence,” Will answered with a bow. He began to leave.

“Will,” Hannibal called after him.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“When we were boys…” he asked. His voice caught in his throat and he struggled with his thoughts for a moment. “Did you… feel anything for me?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Will answered. He locked eyes with the king. “I loathed you with every fiber of my being.”

Chapter 3

The king rolled the quill between his fingers, the feather twirling a mild distraction.

“We are cracking down on censured materials, Your Majesty,” Councilman Anderton droned. He looked agitated when the king only nodded, not looking away from his pen. “We have rounded up some instigators. They are being held, awaiting prosecution.”

“Very good,” Hannibal murmured.

“Their crimes are heresy, My Lord; speaking for a more humanist, secular state apart from the church and His Holiness, the Pope.”

“Then they are in for a wretched experience,” Hannibal replied.

“Your Highness, Will Graham has requested an audience,” Gregor announced from the doorway.

Anderton looked at the steward inquisitively.

“He is not imprisoned, My Lord? Was he not being tried for treason?”

Hannibal dropped the quill and ran his tongue between his teeth and bottom lip.

“Merely a misunderstanding; he’s an old friend from boyhood. I released him when it became clear he was not the man.”

“And so we are still hunting The Mongoose?”

“So it would seem,” Hannibal replied, then told Gregor, “Bring him in. Anderton, if you would excuse us, please.”

When Will bowed, the King met his gaze and saw within his eyes the machinations of a hundred lines of thought.

“I can only assume,” he began, “that the men who were imprisoned recently were consorts of yours.”

“They are my friends, My Lord.”

“They have committed heresy against the Vatican and all of Christendom.”

Will sniffed and replied, “The Vatican and the dictator that sits on its throne have little to do with a philosopher carpenter and his band of fishermen.”

“You are very blunt,” Hannibal mused, rising from his seat and approaching the young man. “Do you not fear the wrath of God?”

“It is those who use his name to promote hatred and cruelty who should be afraid of his wrath. God will recognize his own.”

“They will be rewarded for their devotion in the Kingdom of Heaven?” Hannibal cooed with a smile.

“I would like to think so.”

“I’m sure you’re aware of what punishment awaits your friends.”

Will inhaled as his fingers curled at his sides.

“They will be broken upon the wheel, My Lord.”

“A mirror of Golgotha after the Deposition,” Hannibal remarked, cocking his head and observing his subject. “It’s what the thief who had been promised Paradise really got, when they took the Paschal lamb away.”

“What is that, Your Majesty?”

“His legs broken of course, just like his companion who mocked Christ.”

Will blinked at him, his mouth parting a bit.

“You do not believe in the Kingdom of Heaven?”

“I believe in God, but what I have seen of this world shows me that he has little interest in rewarding or punishing us based on our own convoluted system of morality.”

A small grin quivered at the corner of Will’s mouth.

“If I did not know that I was in the presence of God’s own anointed, I would think I just witnessed blasphemy.”

Hannibal leaned back on his heels.

“I believe that by law, accusing a King of blasphemy is considered in itself blasphemy. I find that rather funny.”

“It just goes around and around,” Will smirked.

Hannibal chuckled, but was momentarily distracted by the way the sun from the windows shone from behind Will’s curls, surrounding his head in a halo of light. He resisted the urge to cup his face in his hands and stroke his fingers through his hair.

Will broke the silence, “If you do not hold to the teachings of the Vatican, why punish humanists and Protestants?”

“Order,” the King answered. “It’s proven beneficial for a people to have a conformed belief system.”

“Why be so cruel?” His voice came out in a whisper, but the glint in his eyes anticipated what he thought the answer might be.

“To imitate God.”

Will grimaced and swallowed.

“God is beyond measure in wanton malice. The highest praise is imitation. What better way to perform sacrament than to display, for his pleasure, our own attempts at cruelty; even if they may pale in comparison?”

Will shook his head, not entirely sure of whether the man was being ironic or sincere.

“Do you know of the first sacrament, Will?”

“It was performed by Abel.”

“His brother Cain attempted a sacrament and failed.”

“He burned vegetables, Abel burned flesh.”

“Why did God choose Abel’s sacrament, Will, do you know? Was it because it symbolized the sacrificial lamb that was to come?”

Will thought for a moment and answered, “It was because he enjoyed the smell, My Lord.”

“Precisely,” Hannibal replied. “God is not a being of complex intentions. He is one of pure carnal delights. When your friends are strapped to the wheel and their bones are shattered with iron rods, if he’s up there, he will love it.”

“And what of the good you have done for your citizens? They are reasonably well-fed and disease-free…”

“Oh you admit I have done some good?”

“Some.”

“It can’t all be bad can it?” Hannibal said. “There must be balance. Typhoid and swans—it all comes from the same place.”

Will was silent and Hannibal went on, “I suppose you are here to plead their case.”

“Not only that,” Will told him. “I’m here to persuade you to overturn the nation’s laws on censorship.”

“Go on,” Hannibal said. “Persuade me.”

Will tilted his head and moved closer to the King. He turned slightly so that the sun fell across his eyes, his pupils becoming pinpoints against deep blue irises.

“I think you want to take me,” he said in a low voice. “Not rut at me like a boy with his playmate. You want to fuck me.”

Hannibal’s chest swelled as his breathing deepened. Will stared back at him, his expression wholly confident.

“You think I would change a law for that chance? I can have any man I desire brought in here, who would gladly ingratiate himself to the King.”

“You don’t want any man, or you would have had them already,” Will pointed out. “You knew I was The Mongoose because I was the only one in the kingdom who bore witness to your lechery. This can only mean that for many years you have had no one, taken no one. You regressed to your natural state when I was alone with you. I can only imagine what a relief that must have been.”

The two were now standing so close that they nearly touched.

Will continued, “I think you would do anything to get your plaything, your whipping boy, back in your possession. Am I wrong?”

Hannibal could feel his breath on his face when he spoke, could smell his scent. His nerves were tingling in his arms and fingers and he felt a dull tugging sensation in his groin. Will smiled.

“I’m not wrong,” he whispered.

“You would let me possess you?” Hannibal asked.

Will let his eyes drop to Hannibal’s collar, then drew them upward seductively. He ran his tongue over his bottom lip and nodded.

“I can stay here, if you like,” he said. “I can be your living doll once more, or something much more… interactive.”

He reached out and fiddled with the silk at Hannibal’s throat. He saw the man’s Adam’s apple bob when he swallowed. Hannibal took a step back.

“I will consider your proposal,” he said.

When Will had left him, Hannibal sat down at his desk and steepled his fingers together in front of his mouth. His eyes darted with thought. Memories of his boyhood flitted through his mind.

“Why must I be Lavinia?” young Will asked, gathering up the bed sheet that the prince had given him.

“Because you’re pretty,” Hannibal laughed.

Earlier in their lessons, Hoffman was lecturing on Shakespeare and let Hannibal choose which of the plays they were to study. To his chagrin, the young prince chose Titus

Andronicus. Now the two boys played alone and Hannibal insisted upon acting out choice scenes.

“Come on, take off your clothes,” Hannibal ordered. He watched as Will stripped naked and began to wrap the sheet around his body like a toga.

“What beggst thou, fond woman?” Hannibal began, pointing at Will theatrically.

Will rose to the occasion and put on his most dramatic voice, “'Tis present death I beg; and one thing more that womanhood denies my tongue to tell: O, keep me from their worse than killing lust, and tumble me into some loathsome pit, where never man's eye may behold my body.”

He threw the back of his hand against his forehead.

“Do this, and be a charitable murderer.”

They both began to giggle a bit and Hannibal darted forward and grabbed Will’s arm.

“So should I rob my sweet sons of their fee? No, let them satisfy their lust on thee!”

Hannibal jumped to the side and put on a deeper voice.

“Away! For thou hast stay'd us here too long!”

Hannibal grabbed Will again and began to drag him.

“And now we will act out the scene that’s not in the play,” he said.

Will glanced at him nervously, but said nothing when Hannibal pulled away his toga and left him naked once more. The prince pushed him down to the floor and straddled him, pinning his arms above his head. He imitated the action of pulling out a knife and hacking away Will’s hands. Will shrieked and mimicked pain. He clenched his hands into fists to resemble stumps.

“Put out thy tongue, that I may cut it out and ravish thee.”

Will opened his mouth and began to stick his tongue out. Hannibal grasped it and made a cutting motion, and Will responded with a hushed screaming sound at the back of his throat. The prince lifted up on his knees and ran his fingers over Will’s body, brutishly massaging his chest and tracing lines down his torso.

Will pursed his lips and craned his neck as he watched Hannibal touch him. He grunted when Hannibal lifted his legs and brought his knees against his chest, opening him up. He shook his head emphatically and made moaning sounds with his tongue pulled back into his mouth.

“I now make pillage of thy chastity,” Hannibal murmured. He licked his fingers and began to probe them into Will’s exposed ass. He grinned when Will twitched and tried to pull away.

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, wriggling at the touch.

“Don’t speak,” Hannibal hissed, “Your tongue is cut out, remember?”

Will closed his eyes through the aching, burning sensation as Hannibal pushed his finger inside of him.

“Haven’t I been good lately?” the prince asked. “You haven’t been beaten in a while.”

Will nodded and released a squeak when Hannibal pulled his finger out a bit and then pushed it in again.

“Play nice and it will last even longer.”

Will tried to relax but he quivered and lurched when Hannibal pushed two fingers inside of him. A mewling sound erupted from his throat and he clenched his fists even tighter. Then Hannibal pulled his fingers out and fell on top of him, bucking his hips between Will’s legs and slamming his groin up against his ass in a dry hump. He pressed against him so that his lower belly was against Will’s cock.

The whipping boy couldn’t play-act any more. He whimpered and threw his head back, mouth open. His breath came out in anxious shudders. The soft fabric of Hannibal’s shirt rubbed against him and he began to stiffen. He still kept his hands clenched as stumps, but he couldn’t help but move his own hips against Hannibal’s. He still, however, looked the part of Lavinia: terrified and humiliated. His body invaded, his ass still aching from the stretch of Hannibal’s fingers. He tried to hold still despite the sensation of silk against his twitching cock. Hannibal smiled down at him and suddenly dipped his head to plant a kiss on Will’s parted lips.

The boy looked back at him with eyes wide.

King Hannibal leaned forward at his desk and took his quill in hand. He remembered how it was after Will had been taken from him. There was a tension that built up in his body, the intolerable boredom and the deep cravings that could no longer be satisfied. He *pined* for the boy. Never again had he felt such implacable desire; until now. The thought of having him back again to act out his fantasies and to be *his* once more was uniquely delicious.

He wrote out the new law. Speech that was not directly treasonous to His Highness, King Hannibal, was no longer prohibited. Any citizens imprisoned for these charges would be pardoned. He signed and sealed the parchment.

Chapter 4

“You will stay in the room directly beneath my own, accessible by this back door and stairway here.”

Hannibal opened the door in his room to reveal the stone staircase leading downward.

“You will come whenever I summon you, of course.”

“Of course,” Will replied, “Provided my friends remain safe from prosecution.”

“They are safe,” Hannibal assured him. He gazed at the young man standing before him in his loose white shirt that lay open at the collar and his wild dark curls. Excitement was building in his chest and for a moment he wondered what he wouldn’t do to ensure that Will was in his possession, always.

Will caught his longing expression and bowed to him.

“What is your bidding, My Lord?”

“I believe we should engage in a little quid pro quo,” Hannibal said. “You have redeemed the slanderers. Like Christ, you should take their sins upon yourself.”

“I would gladly take another beating for their sake,” Will responded.

“No, I have something more specific in mind.”

Hannibal moved to his armoire and brought out a contraption made of metal and leather. It was a scold’s bridle, with a point protruding below the muzzle.

“A suitable punishment for gossip and slander,” he said with a touch of amusement.

Will was silent as Hannibal placed the mask on his face and buckled the straps behind his head. It covered his nose and mouth and lifted his jaw upward like a posture collar. The point thrust upward behind his chin, preventing him from speaking. Hannibal tightened it and Will’s eyes closed as his head jerked back, craning his neck.

Hannibal turned to face him and Will opened his eyes once more. They were more communicative than his lips could ever be. He glowered at the king with boiling blue pools. In his eyes, Hannibal saw reflected the truth of who he was. Will was always the one to see. He backed away slowly.

“Undress,” Hannibal ordered.

Will fumbled to pull his shirt over his head, unable to look down or relax his neck. He let it drop to the floor and unbuttoned his trousers. As he stripped, he never broke their mutual stare. When he was nude he straightened his back and waited for the king’s instructions.

Hannibal drank the image in. There was something thrillingly beautiful about the juxtaposition of jagged, metal muzzle and smooth, naked flesh. He waited for as long as he could, teasing himself with focused attention on every inch of the young man.

He walked behind him and studied his back, straight and poised; the curve of his ass at the base of his spine and the fleshy area where it met his slightly spread thighs. He could still see beige stripes across his cheeks from where he had bruised him before. Passing in front of him again, he admired the young man's stretched throat; the taut lines of his neck muscles and the jutting of his Adam's apple.

The king could resist no longer. He reached out and wrapped his strong hands around Will's throat, running his thumbs against his jugular and digging his fingers through the soft hair at the nape of his neck. He squeezed, slowly applying pressure to his windpipe and cutting off his air. He listened for the sounds of wheezing through the muzzle, the clicking sound in his esophagus. He choked him until those insolent eyes broke contact and rolled upward.

When he released, Will gazed back again, very calm, though the whites of his eyes had grown pink. A soft hiss escaped through barely parted lips. His jaw quivered and he swallowed, the rims of his eyelids wet from the strain. There was no shock in his expression, no pleading. In those eyes Hannibal saw no illusions about himself.

Hannibal took hold of the bridle and led Will like an untamed creature to his bed. He pushed him down on his back. In this position, Will's neck seemed even more craned. It curved away from the mattress, his head thrown back in stunning display. Hannibal lifted Will's legs, brushing his lips against a knee and savoring the sight of his spreading thighs and exposed hole.

He began to press the front of his trousers against him, dry-humping him as he had done many times before. Then he opened his pants, brought his cock out, and let it slide over Will's genitals and between his cheeks. He listened to the labored breathing behind the metal mask. The young man was watching him in his enforced silence, only blinking, dark lashes batting slowly.

He wanted to take him this way, rather than bent over the couch or on his belly. He wanted to stare into those intense eyes when he finally took him. Hannibal picked up some ointment that he'd placed on the table and slathered it onto his cock. He guided the head of it into Will's opening and very slowly pressed inward. Will's breath hitched and his neck tightened. Hannibal pushed in further. His nerves shivered and sang when he heard the low moan through gritted teeth, muffled and tense. Steadily, he moved his cock fully inside of him, until his hips were flush with his spread ass. Will tightened and quivered around him and Hannibal groaned and leaned down on his elbows, lifting Will's knees even higher, opening him further.

Closer to Will's face, he moved his hips back and forth slowly, listening to the wet sound of breathing through teeth and lips, and a soft high noise that erupted from his throat when he began to thrust. He moved in and out of him, harder now, watching his head slide over the mattress, dark hair falling over the sheets and framing his muzzled face.

Now he was slapping his hips against Will's backside, digging his fingernails into his thighs. Sharp grunts made way for gagged moans. His moans became bleats and the bridle's point began to dig into his jaw, marking it with a tiny spot of blood.

Hannibal fell forward and wrapped his hands around his craning throat once more. He listened for the choking sound, watched his eyes roll and grow wet while he fucked him hard. When Will began to shudder and his hands flailed toward the king's chest, twisting his fingers into the silk of his cravat, Hannibal erupted into orgasm. He gave the young man a few more stiff thrusts, groaned loudly with a violent spasm, and released his grip from Will's windpipe. A strangled whining sound and harsh breathing followed.

Hannibal pressed his lips against Will's eyelids, and Will opened them. His stormy-colored eyes darted over Hannibal's. Still muzzled, but there was no silence in that stare.

Councilman Anderton pored over the documents at his desk.

"What is His Majesty thinking, passing this amendment?"

His steward stood before him, arms tucked behind his back in gentlemanly fashion.

"The recent offenders, who you sought to apprehend yourself, have been pardoned and released," he told him.

"Baffling," Anderton scoffed.

"In addition, Will Graham, the man previously suspected of treasonous libel has taken up residence in the palace."

Anderton sat back and stared at the man.

"The king no longer seeks The Mongoose, I gather."

"It appears not, My Lord."

Anderton tapped his lip with his finger and said, "I want you to investigate this Will Graham. Find out who he consorts with and bring someone in for interrogation."

Chapter 5

“I have another proposition,” Will said.

He had been summoned to Hannibal’s chambers once more, and now he lounged on his couch, eyes gleaming as he watched the king’s gaze move over him.

“You have more to offer me?” Hannibal asked.

“I know you enjoy torturing me,” Will told him. “I know you really enjoyed our little quid pro quo.”

Hannibal sat next to Will and began to play with the collar of his shirt. Will leaned into the touch with a cocky tilt of his head and a slowly lifting glance.

“I did,” Hannibal replied.

“Allow me to make another exchange; take more sins upon myself. You can exact upon me whatever fitting punishment you desire.”

“For what sins are you accounting?”

“That of all prisoners,” Will let his head drop so that he was rubbing his cheek against the king’s hand. “I want you to outlaw their torture. Hurt me instead.”

Hannibal stroked his face, working his fingers into his hair.

“You would be the whipping boy for the entire kingdom,” he replied with a smile.

“Would that please you, My Lord?”

Hannibal nodded.

“Agreed. I will give you the pain of a prisoner,” he said, standing up. “Come.”

Hannibal led Will down the hallway toward the tower. On the way, they passed Councilman Anderton and his steward. Will gave them a little bow and a cheeky smirk and Anderton followed the two of them with his eyes until they were out of sight.

When they reached the tower, Hannibal brought Will down to a secluded room. He lit the candles in the wall sconces, and Will looked upon what stood in the center.

It was a rack; a large table with two cranks and ropes leading to shackles at the head and foot.

“This is the torture that awaits many prisoners,” Hannibal remarked, lightly dragging his knuckles up Will’s spine. “Are you certain that you want to endure it?”

Will shivered and nodded.

“Remove your clothing,” Hannibal commanded, “And lie down.”

Will stripped and then laid himself on the wooden table, placing his arms above his head. Hannibal strapped his wrists down, letting his fingers drag up his arms before fastening the shackles, and then tracing the grooves of his pelvic muscles, his hip bones, and his legs before fastening his ankles as well.

Will rolled his head to one side and watched Hannibal move to the crank. His chest started to rise and fall with quickening breaths. Hannibal watched him, enjoying the first few moments of fear before the real torment began. He turned the crank, and Will sucked his bottom lip between his teeth as the ropes pulled his wrists tight above his head and began to drag his body across the table until his head dropped over the side and he had to lift his neck in order to see.

Hannibal turned another crank and the ropes connected to the buckles on Will’s ankles began to tighten. They pulled until Will’s feet were pointing and the muscles in his legs were tense. Hannibal ran his fingers over Will’s taut belly, under his lower back that curved away from the table, and along the jutting lines of his ribcage. He watched goose bumps rise along his pale skin as he ran a thumb over his nipples and then the angles of his collarbone. He smiled when he saw Will’s cock twitch and rise.

He moved his hands down his lean torso and began to work his fingers through the patch of dark pubic hair, pulling it until Will’s hips lifted off of the table. Then he turned the crank again, the sounds of rope stretching and Will’s breath catching in his throat. He tightened it until Will’s ankles and calves were spread and no longer touched the table. Will could no longer move at all, only quiver when Hannibal began to pull on his cock.

“Do you remember the first time I fondled you?” Hannibal asked.

“I do,” Will replied in a strained voice. “You hurt me, of course.”

The young prince had yanked Will’s pants down and told him that for this game he would have to keep a straight face and not move a muscle while he attached a clothespin to his foreskin. He then made him wear it under his trousers all through Hoffman’s lesson. Will was fidgety and spoke in a small, quaking, sweet voice for the next few hours. It made Hannibal feel the closest thing to affection he’d ever really experienced.

“You had a bit of an erection,” King Hannibal recalled, “Just as you do now.”

He pulled at Will’s foreskin and pinched it between his fingers. Will hissed and tossed his head as he continued to stretch the sensitive skin.

“My first time being touched, and it was mingled with pain. Naturally I would forever conflate the two. You twisted me, but I suppose that makes you proud.”

“It does, a bit,” Hannibal said, curling his lips away from his teeth in a grin.

Hannibal worked his hands over Will’s cock, pinching, squeezing, and pulling until he was fully erect.

“Is pleasure from pain so twisted?” Hannibal mused. “Pain is merely the warning that death is inevitable, and I've always found the idea of death comforting. The thought that my life could end at any moment frees me to fully appreciate the beauty and art and horror of everything this world has to offer.”

“Typhoid and swans,” Will remarked through gritted teeth.

“Through all of our suffering on this earth, the least we can say is that we were as similar to God as humanly possible.”

“If you can't beat God, become him?”

“At the very least, catch his attention,” Hannibal answered, “We all look at God, hoping that he is looking back at us.”

Hannibal released Will’s cock and the young man gasped. He admired the way his chest heaved and his belly twitched. He turned the crank once more and Will groaned, his muscles pulling tight and his joints popping as they stretched. His legs were lifted a bit from the table and Hannibal drifted a hand between them and fingered the cleft of his ass.

“What would God think of you right now, in this moment?” he asked. “Would he be touched by your selfless sacrifice, or would he only thrill at the sound of your screams, just as he thrilled at the smell of burning flesh?”

Hannibal turned the crank and Will’s eyes opened wide, his mouth stretched open. A throaty, bleating sound emerged. He could not answer.

King Hannibal pondered the nature of God as he gazed at the man before him. The way his mouth gaped open, his soft fleshy lips parting beautifully to reveal a wet tongue, excited him. He moved to his head and opened his trousers, then guided his cock into his mouth. He cradled his curly head in one hand and cupped his beautifully sharp jawline with the other as he began to push in and out of him. Will’s fingers curled as he opened wider, providing a well-serving hole for the king to fuck.

Hannibal watched Will’s own cock bob, watched his limbs shudder against the rack as he thrust against his face. He listened to the sounds of slurping and choking and whimpering through the nose. When he came, he pressed hard against him, nearly suffocating him as he massaged Will’s throat, forcing him to swallow.

“Councilman, we’ve found one of the men who were previously arrested for publishing censored materials. He’s a known associate of Will Graham.”

Anderton followed his steward into the tower. In one of the rooms, a dark-haired man slouched, bound to a chair, his wrists lashed to armrests. His head bowed low, his mouth and eyes bruised and lacerated, and a string of saliva hung from his lips.

“What is his name?” Anderton asked.

“Brian Zeller.” The steward looked nervous and added, “Councilman, these men told me they were acting on your orders to use force upon apprehension and interrogation, but I’m sure you must know that the king has outlawed the torture of prisoners.”

“The king is not acting in his best interest these days,” Anderton said.

He reached out and lifted the chin of the bound man. Zeller’s bleary eyes tried to focus under heavy-knitted brows.

“Your publication is on similar footing to that of the author known as The Mongoose,” he told him.

“I wrote nothing treasonous,” Zeller slurred. “I spoke out against society at large, not His Majesty in particular. Therefore, I have broken no laws.”

“You are refusing to disclose the identity of a known traitor. That makes you a traitor. Tell us who he is, and save yourself.”

Zeller pulled his head away from Anderton’s fingers and let it loll downward to his chest once more. The councilman gestured to one of the interrogators and his steward shifted uneasily. The interrogator took up a mallet and shoved a small block of wood underneath the index finger of Zeller’s left hand. He brought it down with a dreadful crunch.

Zeller screamed and threw his head back. His finger swelled into a sickening twisted shape.

“Who is The Mongoose?” Anderton asked, nodding at the interrogator. He moved the wood block to his middle finger and held the mallet in place.

“You can’t do this,” Zeller moaned.

Anderton gave the go ahead and the mallet came down again, dislocating and snapping Zeller’s knuckles. He lurched forward as far as his bonds would allow and his mouth gaped open in a silent, agonized scream.

Anderton took Zeller’s face in his hands and shook him.

“I can do whatever I want to you, don’t you see? You are aiding a traitor to the king! I can have you pulled apart by horses and feasted upon by crows while you still breathe!”

The interrogator grasped Zeller’s ring finger and thrust the block beneath it. The swelling in his fingers had spread up the back of his hand, blooming with blood under the skin. Zeller watched him set aim with the mallet.

“Will Graham!” he suddenly cried out. “His name is Will Graham. Please, please stop.”

Anderton straightened and smiled down at the prisoner.

“Release him,” he said. “That’s all I needed to know.”

Chapter 6

Anderton took his seat at the head of the small council table. Councilman Price, a small man with a persistently bemused expression, and Councilman Crawford, a broad, intimidating sort joined him. The council secretary stood by the door, scrawling on parchment.

“I have called a meeting to discuss a threat to His Majesty’s order,” Anderton announced.

“I would like to point out the obvious,” Price interjected, “That His Majesty is not present for reasons unknown to the small council.”

Anderton acknowledged him with a tap to his temple and said, “The king is currently under the sway of deceptive influence, which I am just about to explain, if you will let me Councilman Price, and approaching him requires that we all be at an understanding.”

“Proceed, Anderton,” Crawford rumbled in an impatient tone that he often carried during tedious arguments.

“It has been brought to my attention,” Anderton continued, “That the treasonous, libelous individual who calls himself ‘The Mongoose’ has wiled his way into His Majesty’s own favor. He has somehow become able to influence the decisions of the most high and bring about a state of lawlessness and godlessness in this land.”

“How came about you to this knowledge?” Crawford asked.

“A known consort of The Mongoose, Brian Zeller, has informed me that his true identity is Will Graham, a man often seen in the king’s company as of late.”

“Will Graham is His Highness’ boyhood friend,” Price added. “The king has assured the council that he is not The Mongoose.”

“I have reason to believe that the information I have gathered is correct.”

Crawford cleared his throat and leaned heavily on the table, saying, “And I have it on good authority that you received this intelligence by way of torturing the informant, an act that is strictly prohibited by law.”

Anderton stammered in bewilderment then replied, “I believed that in this case, the ends justify the means…”

“’The ends justify the means’ is not an admissible defense in the king’s court… Councilman,” Price remarked.

“Are we taking this to the king’s court?” Anderton shouted.

“I didn’t say that…”

“Gentlemen!” Crawford called out, his deep voice hushing the other members instantly, “Back to the matter at hand, if you please.”

“It is my belief,” Anderton continued meekly, “That His Majesty has been… seduced… by a man with treacherous intent.”

“Seduced,” Crawford repeated.

Price sniffed and shot Anderton his smuggest expression.

“Does the councilman mean intellectually, sexually, spiritually?”

“Intellectually and spiritually, certainly. Sexually, perhaps.”

Price rolled his eyes.

“His Majesty has not taken a queen,” Anderton insisted. “It is not unreasonable to infer that he may prefer the company of men. This Will Graham is quite handsome, as he is devious.”

“I propose that we each individually look into these claims against Will Graham and convene at a later date,” Crawford stated.

“His Majesty is passing erroneous laws as we speak,” Anderton piped.

“His Majesty’s law is never erroneous,” Crawford growled.

“Of course, I only meant that… of course,” Anderton conceded.

The councilmembers stood and Crawford dismissed the secretary. Anderton left in a bit of a huff, but Price lingered. They waited for some time, and then the door to the chambers opened.

Will Graham entered.

“Mister Mongoose,” Price said with a lilting voice and a smile.

“Councilmen,” Will replied with a generous bow.

“As handsome as he is devious,” Crawford chuckled.

“You flatter me.”

“I must say, I admire how quickly you have gained the king’s trust,” Price told him.

“Trust is a strong word,” Will replied with a knit brow. “He can only be persuaded on what he wants to be persuaded. I would never ask anything of him that I wasn’t quite certain he would approve. Truly, he trusts no one.”

“Even so.”

Crawford explained, “We are well on our way to ridding ourselves of Councilman Anderton. The Guillotine, The Knights, and The Mongoose are in place. All we need now is The Architect.”

“You’ve managed to encourage His Majesty to pass two articles of legislation in your time at the palace,” Price said. “We only need one more.”

“You understand what that entails?” Crawford asked.

“I do,” Will answered with a nod. He bowed once more and said, “Good day, Councilmen.”

“Godspeed to the revolution,” Crawford responded, and Price repeated the phrase.

Hannibal observed the way Will was standing before him; how his hips swayed to one side as he cocked his head and smirked impishly back at him. It was different from the way he behaved when he was being summoned for a common tryst. He knew he was going to make another request. It made him smile. There was something pleasurable about being seduced. Knowing one was being seduced, and allowing it; letting that person sew their own pocket of power into the silk of one’s garments.

“Ask me,” he murmured into his ear, enjoying the way his breath fluttered the curls of hair that framed his head like a crown. He let his fingers linger over his bare chest, scratching over a nipple with his nails.

“The kingdom has an age-old ban on homosexuality,” Will replied in a soft voice. “I think it’s time that was overturned.”

The king grunted and kissed the dimpled corner of Will’s mouth.

“I don’t think I would have demanded an exchange for that one, but since you’ve already made the request with that in mind…”

“I’m surprised that you haven’t already, given your own proclivities.”

“I mostly leave things as they were unless otherwise enticed,” Hannibal replied. “I assume you know the punishment for those proclivities.”

“A scourge followed by five years of imprisonment, same as unlawful publication.”

“A public scourge,” Hannibal insisted. “Do you know why I make that distinction?”

Will tossed his head but didn’t answer the rhetorical question.

“Because,” Hannibal explained, “While the exposition of atrocious torture instruments could not fail to appeal to a connoisseur of the worst in mankind, the essence of the worst, the true substance of the human spirit, is not found in the iron maiden or the whetted edge. Elemental ugliness is found in the faces of the crowd.”

“Then I am afraid we are at a loss,” Will remarked, “For we are very much alone right now.”

“I do not care to make our time together ugly.”

Hannibal pulled a sheet from his bed, touching on a memory from childhood of Will wrapped in one and reciting Shakespeare. He twisted it into a rope and bound Will’s hands together. He led him to an iron hook that hung from a column and looped the rope over it, pulled him tight so that he was nearly on his toes, and tied it off. Then he pushed his hands into his trousers and lowered them as his fingers smoothed over Will’s hips and thighs.

He went to his armoire and retrieved a leather flogger. He returned and lightly brushed the tails against Will’s back, awakening the skin and watching the hair on his arms stand on end.

Hannibal pulled back the flogger and struck Will across his sharp shoulder-blades. He relished the sounds he made as he worked his way down, over the lean meat of his back and the peachy round flesh of his ass. He was making him dance, rising up on his toes, leaning against the pole, pulling back with his hands grasping onto the linen fabric of the rope. His gasps became shivering moans and then wet cries.

Then Hannibal stopped. He untied his whipping boy and embraced him. His back and ass were solid red with tiny dark red spider webs of lacerations. He led him to the bed and lay him down on his stomach. Then Hannibal began to undress himself. Will watched him out of the corner of his eye, his cheek pressed against the pillow and his eyes wide. It would be the first time he saw him unclothed.

Hannibal climbed into the bed next to him and straddled his hips. He moved his mouth over Will’s back, hot flesh warming his lips. He lingered over the lines of broken skin, tasting trace amounts of coppery blood.

Will spread his legs and arched his back, pushing his ass against Hannibal’s groin. The king groaned and pressed back, working his cock between his cheeks and grinding.

“Lift up,” he told him.

Will lifted to his knees and jutted himself out. He emitted a soft moan when Hannibal reached around and began to stroke him. He gyrated and humped at his hand, giving him a pleasant sight. Hannibal stroked them both off together, first Will so that he could hear the sounds of his orgasm before spilling his own cum onto his backside and thighs. They relaxed into their collective mess.

“I can keep you,” Hannibal thought aloud.

“Don’t you think you would grow tired of me, My Lord?” Will murmured. “All of your boyhood memories like candles floating in oil. They are so much more vivid, are they not? Our time in the present will dull and blur together.”

Hannibal pressed his lips against his shoulder and whispered, “If I saw you every day forever, I would remember this time.”

Will felt a twinge of something beneath the steepled fingers of his ribcage. He rubbed it out by way of his cheek brushing against the pillow.

The woman sat on the dirt floor of her cell with her knees drawn up to her chest. Her matted hair clung to the dried streaks on her face. She twitched at the sound of a rat scurrying between the wall and the pile of hay that was her bed.

She had once used a lump of coal to etch tally marks on the wall for every time the slop drudge brought her a meal. At first she believed it was every day, but now she wasn't so sure. There was no way of telling time in this place. The tally marks left off long ago.

Her back was covered with the scars from her scourge. At first, when she had been brought here, they bled through her sackcloth shirt, and then they stung as the rough fabric scraped against them. Then they began to itch horribly, so that she scratched and rubbed against the stones to relieve the sensation. Now they felt like nothing, just a relative tightness in her toughened skin.

It was love that sent her to this pit. She was grateful only she had been accused and none of her friends that she knew of. It wasn't love that kept her mind from slipping into a stupor. It was images of strange interlocking pieces of metal, the smell of gunpowder, clockwork machinations that had never seen the light of a forge, complex schematics etched on oiled parchment, scribed with code.

Sometimes she reached out with a bony finger to scratch designs into the dirt on the floor, swiping them away the instant she heard so much as a shuffle from down the hall. Now she heard keys jangling, footsteps approaching. When her cell door creaked and groaned, she shuffled on her haunches to the corner of the cell.

"You've just been pardoned," the guard told her.

She stepped out into the early evening. They had given her no instructions on where to go. When she saw the footman standing by a carriage beckon her closer, she stopped short and looked at him with a sideways glance.

"Madame Verger!" a voice called from within the carriage.

She slowly approached, peering into the open window. A very well-dressed burly man sat inside with a satisfied look on his face.

"I am Councilman Crawford, please join me."

Margot Verger climbed inside and sat across from the man. She blinked and looked him over.

"We have assured your release from prison, Madame Verger," Crawford explained. "We have also found a place for you to stay where you can have a nice bath and a hot meal. I'm sure you would enjoy that very much."

Margot's thoughts were much like her coded schematics. They sprawled out over her mind in strange shapes and rambling ink-scratches. But all she could say in her hoarse, underused voice was, "Why?"

"We need your help."

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the delay. I had a lot going on recently. More to come!

Margot Verger opened her eyes. For a moment she scanned the room, looking for the gray stone walls that she had grown so accustomed to. Her eyes seemed to reject the wood and wallpaper and embroidered curtains over tall, brightly-lit windows. She felt the soft fabric of a mattress against her body instead of the scratchy pile of hay and in lieu of scuttling and creaking metal doors she heard the sound of men talking from the floor beneath her. She could smell something wonderful.

Slowly she climbed out of bed. Someone had laid out her new clothes over the back of a chair. She began to dress, and looked into a gilded mirror on the wall. Crawford's servant could not get a comb through the mats in her hair, so she had cut them out, giving her a boyish style. It suited the clothes they had given her: a waistcoat, jacket, and trousers.

She wandered downstairs toward the voices, leaning on the banister. When she entered the room, the men didn't notice her at first. Crawford sat at a table with two other men. One was a small, fair-haired older gentleman with wincing eyes. The other was young, with dark hair and prominent features.

"You must be careful when scattering the flyers. Target the wealthy districts, but be sure they cannot be traced back to you," the fair-haired man told the younger.

They all stood to their feet when they saw her approach.

"Madame Verger," Crawford announced. "These are my comrades, Councilman Price…"

The fair-haired man bowed.

"… And Brian Zeller."

The younger man stepped toward her and shook her hand. She could see his left hand was bandaged with two wooden splints along the fingers. His face looked bruised, but he smiled broadly at her.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Madame," he said.

"I trust you slept well?" Crawford asked.

"Yes, thank you," Margot replied.

Her eyes fell upon the breakfast laid out on the table. There was a Bundt-shaped loaf of egg washed bread, brown and shiny, and a plate of hot sausages, the smell of which made her mouth water, and a bowl of small oranges.

Crawford noticed her hungry gaze and said, “Please, sit, have something to eat.”

The footman pulled out a chair for her and poured a glass of water. She found herself seizing a hunk of the bread, which pulled away to reveal soft, steamy interior. She couldn’t withhold for propriety’s sake when she began plucking several sausages and hoarding them on her plate. She ate with two hands, stopping only to gulp a mouthful of water and snatch an orange, which she peeled rather brutishly, causing the juice to trickle down her hands.

Councilman Price sniffed a laugh, his mouth puckered. She looked up at them and swallowed sheepishly.

“You said you needed me,” she finally said, “What for?”

“This nation has been ruled by a monarchy for too long,” Price answered. “We are organizing a coup. We are the Knights; the leadership. We have our two saboteurs; one who we call the Mongoose, and Zeller here, who we call the Guillotine. They are working to weaken the state from within.”

Crawford continued, “Now we need someone to help us overcome the Kingsguard.”

“I am no soldier or strategist,” Margot told them.

“No, you are an engineer, a tinkerer,” Price replied, “The Architect.”

Crawford leaned forward on the table.

“We understand that you had designed artillery, but no schematics or notes could be found in your studio.”

“I burned them,” Margot explained, “Upon impending arrest.”

“Then they are lost,” Zeller sighed.

“No,” Margot told him, and lifted a finger to her temple. “They are up here.”

They brought her parchment and a quill and she began to sketch a drawing of a strange contraption.

“This is a mechanized rifle,” she said as they hovered behind her. “A magazine sash of ammunition is fed into the loading system, and fired constantly by way of turning a crank. The recoil removes the spent projectile automatically. No need to stop and reload, no pausing between shots.”

“Incredible,” Crawford muttered. “Does it work?”

“I created a functioning prototype myself. I was forced to destroy it along with my notes, but I have no doubt that they can be made in large numbers and perform to your expectations.”

“Weapons such as these could overcome even a ready Kingsguard,” Zeller proclaimed.

“There is more,” Margot said. “The design is sound, although I never had the chance to build it.”

A look of somber regret passed over her face.

“Tell us,” Price urged.

“A coal-powered automatic armored carriage,” Margot described, “Loaded with mechanized artillery.”

She began to etch her plans and the men crowded closer, looking on in wonder. Margot locked eyes with Crawford. A proud smirk tugged at her mouth.

“With this machine, gentlemen,” she said, “One could overcome even an army that vastly outnumbers.”

“Madame Verger,” Crawford promised, “You will finally have the chance to see your machine.”

“Your Majesty, we have called a meeting of the small council in order to address issues of treason in our midst.”

Crawford folded his hands across his belly and twiddled his thumbs. Councilman Anderton gave a satisfied nod.

“The treachery has proven to be a great danger to Your Grace and the entire kingdom,” Crawford continued.

“What is this treason?” Hannibal asked.

“Councilman Anderton,” said Crawford, “Please tell us about the intelligence you gathered recently concerning a Mr. Will Graham.”

Anderton sat up straight and proudly declared, “I have located a source who confirms that Mr. Graham is the libelous author known as The Mongoose. He is the one who has been publishing lies about you, Your Majesty.”

“And how came you about this intelligence?” Crawford pried.

Anderton shifted in his seat.

“As I stated, I located a source.”

“Both Councilman Price and I bore witness to you admitting that you took this man prisoner and tortured him for a confession.”

Anderton stammered, “I knew that he was a consort of Will Graham, and he was not compliant.”

“His Majesty has outlawed the use of torture on prisoners,” Price muttered. His narrow eyes glared at Anderton and his lips screwed into a disdainful pucker.

Anderton shot Hannibal a nervous glance.

“I felt that the situation required…”

“You felt that you could go against the law of the king,” Crawford interrupted.

Hannibal cocked his head. He looked back and forth between the councilmembers, his eyes glinting and a curious smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth.

“What is this?” Anderton huffed. “I thought we were addressing issues of treason, not minor infractions.”

“That is not all,” Crawford went on. “Some flyers were found distributed within the district in which you reside. Councilman Price, could you read an excerpt for us?”

Price took up the flyer and read aloud, “The Mongoose, as he is calling himself, has seduced the king in his own bedchamber and through treacherous intent has brought about a state of lawlessness and godlessness in this land. His Majesty has even repealed the law against homosexuality in the kingdom, no doubt brought on by his own illicit entanglement with this insidious lecher.”

Silence fell and a soft click emerged from the back of Hannibal’s throat.

Price turned to the secretary and asked, “Could you please read to us the notes you took during our last small council meeting with Councilman Anderton?”

“Yes, My Lord,” he answered. “Councilman Anderton stated, ’The treasonous, libelous individual who calls himself ‘The Mongoose’ has wiled his way into His Majesty’s own favor. He has somehow become able to influence the decisions of the most high and bring about *a state of lawlessness and godlessness in this land*.’”

Anderton’s jaw dropped. His eyes darted between Crawford and Price.

“Anything else?”

“Councilman Anderton goes on to suggest that His Majesty is a homosexual and that he has been seduced by Will Graham.”

“Your Highness,” Anderton interjected, “This is a plot!”

“A plot against the king, manufactured by yourself,” Crawford accused.

“No, it is them, Your Grace,” Anderton insisted. “They have taken my words and construed them against me.”

“Absolute rubbish!” Price retorted. “You have knowingly broken the king’s law in order to find information about Will Graham, which you have admitted, and you have published your findings along with unlawful attacks upon His Highness.”

Hannibal said nothing. He merely watched the argument unfold with a subtle trace of amusement on his face.

“Your Majesty,” Crawford said at last, “The council advises that Anderton be arrested immediately on charges of treason.”

Anderton stood and put his hands on the table.

“My Lord,” he gushed, “I have always and will always be loyal to you.”

Hannibal sat back and ran his hand over his chin. He pondered for a moment, taking in Price and Crawford with inscrutable eyes. Finally he sniffed and straightened himself once more.

“I will defer to the judgment of my council,” he murmured.

Crawford nodded.

“Arrest him,” he ordered.

Two guards took Anderton by the arms and began leading him away.

“This is perfidy!” he shouted. “These men have conspired against me! My Lord!”

Price and Crawford stood and bowed to Hannibal. They were excused and the king stayed seated for a moment, bearing a faraway thoughtful look.

Will languished on Hannibal’s bed, stretched out on his belly with his head lying on a folded arm. He reached out a hand and brushed his fingers through the king’s soft chest hair. Hannibal smiled at the touch and sighed, his chest rising with Will’s hand.

“One of my councilors was beheaded this morning,” he murmured.

“I heard,” Will replied. He propped himself up on an elbow, arching his back.

Hannibal pushed back the sheets that draped over Will’s body, to better view the curve of his lower back and ass. He smiled contentedly and traced his fingers over the young man’s pale skin.

“He was engaging in treason,” Will continued.

“So say my advisors,” Hannibal remarked.

Will furrowed his brow and asked, “What say you?”

“Does it matter?”

“I’d say it matters,” Will insisted. “A man is dead.”

Hannibal inhaled deeply and rolled over, pushing Will onto his side. He maneuvered his hips so that they bumped together, rubbing his groin against Will’s as he kissed him.

“Anderton was a thorn in my side,” he answered. “It's an unfortunate way to leave the court, yes, but I can't help thinking the council will be better for it.”

Will gave him an uneasy smile and returned Hannibal’s kiss. He kept his eyes open, focusing on nothing.

Chapter 8

“Everything is in place,” Price told Will. “It is now up to you to assassinate the king himself. Once he is dead, the Kingsguard will fall and the council will take power.”

Will leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. He seemed distracted.

“Mr. Graham,” Crawford called.

Will nodded and rubbed his face with open palms.

“You can easily slit his throat while he sleeps next to you,” Price suggested. “He doesn’t have to feel any pain.”

“That would be best,” Will agreed.

“Then it will be done,” Price stated with his chin raised. “The revolution will be swift and successful, with minimal casualties on both sides.”

Crawford studied the young man who still looked far away in his thoughts.

“The king thinks you’re his man in the room, I think you’re mine,” he said in a low voice. “When the time comes, will you do what needs to be done?”

Will steadied his gaze.

“Oh yes.”

That night, Will lay in his own bed in the palace and stared at the desk that sat in the corner. A draft came in through the cracked window and rustled the quills in the pot. He closed his eyes.

“You could read a bit,” young Prince Hannibal said to Will as he stood by the open window in their classroom, “Before you came here.”

“I picked up a little in the orphanage,” Will explained. “It was discouraged.”

“We have orphan in common,” Hannibal said.

“That is all we have in common,” Will muttered.

“I don’t know if that’s true,” Hannibal mused. He walked toward Will, who hunched over his desk, trying to finish his lesson. He looked over his shoulder.

“Donum is gender neutral,” he corrected him.

Will sighed and scratched out the misused article with his quill. Hannibal continued to watch as the boy wrote.

“You don’t need to hover over me,” Will remarked. “I’m not stupid.”

“I know you aren’t,” Hannibal said in a soft voice. He sat down next to Will on the bench. Will scooted away a bit.

“When you said reading was ‘discouraged,’ what did you mean?”

“We were expected to work when they told us, eat when they told us, sleep when they told us,” Will answered. “Taking time for myself to practice writing down words and looking at papers could mean a beating.”

Hannibal nodded.

“The other kids were more than happy to snitch on me as well,” Will murmured. “They were almost as entertained as you are seeing me punished."

Will paused and added with a pointed glare, "Although I don’t think they reacted so physically as you do.”

“The other kids didn’t like you very much?” Hannibal asked.

“They thought I was odd.”

“People do not think I am odd,” Hannibal sighed. “Oh, Hoffman thinks I am unruly and my uncle thinks I need structure. They don’t know…”

“They don’t know you like I do,” Will finished.

“That’s right.”

Hannibal considered Will for a moment, gazing at the lovely boy as his nose scrunched up and he twirled the feather of his quill through his dark curls, thinking hard over the next Latin phrase.

“Were you happier there,” the prince asked, “In the orphanage?”

Will gave him a derisive snort.

“Of course not,” he replied. “It was miserable. It was… lonely.”

“You aren’t lonely here?”

Will looked at him, a bit surprised to realize he wasn’t. Hannibal was a bully, but he was intelligent, and he actually seemed to like him despite everything. He had never heard anyone say they were fond of him, or even touch him with a gentle hand. He situated himself in his seat and allowed his thigh to press against Hannibal’s.

“It’s not so bad,” Will whispered.

Hannibal reached out and brushed a stray curl from the boy's eyes. He let his fingers graze over his soft cheek and watched him shiver slightly as his eyelashes slowly batted. He knew Will was touch-starved, and relished the moments when he seemed anxious with the mingling feelings of relief and discomfort as Hannibal showed him that tenderness.

"I had no one in the world," Will continued. "No parents or guardians, no one to care if I was mistreated or if I even lived or died."

"You weren't alone because you had no guardian," Hannibal said. "You could have befriended the other children, you could have made yourself more like them and integrated yourself into the pecking order. No, you are alone because you are unique."

Will turned to face him, his large blue eyes staring into the amber reflection of Hannibal's.

"We are both unique," Hannibal told him, laying his head on the boy's shoulder. "And we are both alone without each other."

Will Graham opened his eyes in his room below the king's bedchamber. He went to his desk and pulled out a pen and parchment.

Your Majesty,

A plot is underway to have you assassinated. For your own safety, you must flee to Rodin, the nearest nation that has no sympathies with your enemies. The low road from Broadspire is safe. Please evacuate as soon as possible, or I fear your life will be forfeit.

A loyal subject

The next day, King Hannibal clutched the note that he had found on his desk. His chest swelled with a deep breath, and his back straightened. He stared ahead, his eyes on the mid-distance as they darted with thought. He exhaled slowly, and found the emptiness in his lungs left an aching sensation.

"Sire?" Gregor asked, concerned by the strange silence and body language of his lord.

"Alert the council," Hannibal ordered. "Tell them I have been forced to leave the country on fear for my well-being. I will take to the east wing. Do not tell anyone that I have remained in the palace."

Crawford and Price met in the small council room with Will.

"I have been informed," Crawford told them, "That the king fled the country last night. The attempt to assassinate him has been foiled."

"The revolution is still at hand," Price pointed out. "With His Majesty gone, the small council has acting power."

“He may return and retake that power,” Crawford replied.

“Not without some effort,” Will added. “Your armies can absorb or eliminate the Kingsguard and if Hannibal attempts to return, he can be killed.”

“I had hoped that the coup would be immediate and relatively simple,” Crawford sniffed.

“Perhaps the people should be given time to be more integral to the overthrow of their tyrant. It sends the message that they are…”

The door to the small council room flew open and a line of guards marched in.

“What is the meaning of this?” Price asked, standing.

A guard grabbed him by the arm and another pulled Crawford to his feet. Will backed away from the table against the wall. He watched in despair as everything fell to pieces. Two guards moved to him and yanked him forward.

“Councilman Crawford, Councilman Price, and Will Graham,” the captain of the guard announced as they apprehended them, “You are under arrest for treason and conspiracy to assassinate His Majesty King Hannibal.”

Will allowed them to clap the shackles on his arms. A sickly swallow quivered in his throat. When Hannibal entered the room, his shoulders twitched and his eyes grew wide. The king drew close to him and placed his hand around Will’s neck. He touched his forehead to his in a moment of embrace.

“You were supposed to leave,” Will whispered.

Hannibal smirked with a barely perceptible shake of his head, then gestured for the guards to take the men away.

Will slumped against the wall of his cell, his hands lifted by shackles chained to dowels on the wall. He wondered if the law against torturing prisoners would be lifted now. Crawford and Price were somewhere in this dungeon with him. They all had information about the coup that could easily be pried out of them through great pain. Will was no stranger to pain, but the councilors were pampered aristocrats. How long would it be before Zeller and the others were outed as co-conspirators?

He heard the sound of boots and the shuffling of armor coming down the hallway. Then the door opened and two guards entered. He stood to his feet, bracing himself for the agony to come.

The guards bashed into him and slammed him against the wall. They held his arms up above his head and pulled the chains tight so that his wrists were immobile. Then they fastened a shackle around his throat and locked him into place. He stood stiff with his neck pinned against the stones. Hannibal then entered, and the guards were dismissed.

Will watched the king approach him slowly. He could see weariness in the man's eyes and mouth.

"How long have you known?" Will asked.

"I was aware that Councilmen Price and Crawford were up to something when they voted to eliminate Anderton," Hannibal answered. "I did not know that you were a part of it as well, until I found the note in my office."

"How did you know that was my letter?"

Hannibal clucked his tongue at him.

"You forget that I spent many months looking at your handwriting when we were children. It hasn't changed much. Still so atrocious."

Will sighed and bit his lip, angry at his own mistake.

"I was trying to warn you."

"Do you think I am a fool?" Hannibal hissed. "That I would go off down that road and make myself vulnerable to be way-sided by assassins? I knew you resented me, but to take my life…"

"No, no," Will promised, shaking his head as much as he could within the shackle, "Not your life. That road was safe. I wished to spare you."

"My kingdom then, you would take that from me?"

Will bent his knees, letting himself hang by wrists and throat.

"Every tyrant will eventually be deposed," he replied.

"Why did you try to spare me, Will?" Hannibal asked, growing closer. "Didn't you want to see me punished for my cruelty toward you?"

"I don't want to punish you, My Lord," Will said. "Not any more than I would punish a shark for being a shark."

Hannibal smiled. He placed his hand on Will's cheek and watched the same mixture of desire and anxiety in his reaction.

"Price and Crawford will be beheaded tomorrow morning," he told him.

"And what of my head?" Will asked. "When will I lose mine?"

Hannibal watched the young man's lips as he spoke.

"We live in a primitive time, Will" he murmured. "Neither savage nor wise. Half measures are the curse of it. Any rational society would either kill you or put you to use."

At the last phrase he let his fingers move over the collar and Will's heaving chest. Will's breath caught in his throat and a quivering sound emerged as Hannibal pressed up against him and began to fondle him through his trousers.

"I don't believe I will be killing you," Hannibal continued.

"Then put me to use," Will whispered, straining into the touch. His nostrils flared with his huffing breath.

Hannibal brought his hand back and looked into the impudent gaze of Will Graham. His steely blue eyes bore into him, daring him to be his worst self. Eyes that saw everything and knew his nature so well.

He clicked his tongue once more and left the cell. As he walked along the hall he thought of what he had. He could keep this remarkable boy here forever, chained to a wall. He could break his spirit and make him a keening, obedient slave, thirsty for even a modicum of kindness in a sea of torment.

He thought of those beautiful eyes and the life that burned behind them. He imagined what it would mean to truly break the man down and dissolve his brash temperament. To see those eyes go dark and dead, to no longer look back at him with sincere accusation.

Hannibal felt a sinking feeling within himself. This new fantasy was not as pleasurable as he had hoped. Instead, he felt only sadness.

Chapter 9

Night fell, and Will attempted to sleep on his feet with his neck chained against the wall. His knees bent as he hung from his wrists.

He was jolted awake by the sounds of men outside barking orders. A great cry rang out and then a hail of bullets. Then came crashing; the groaning creaks of metal bending and stones collapsing.

Will craned his neck against the collar at his throat, trying to see through the bars of his tiny cell window. He heard a tremendous rumbling sound and could see smoke billowing forth from around the corner of the wall. He could see a glowing light and hear the roaring of a hungry furnace. A bronze carriage rolled into view, with artillery lining the edges like cannons on a warship. They fired simultaneously, again and again. The great blazing furnace rested inside of the mouth of a gigantic bronze hog.

The carriage rolled out of sight once more, followed by scores of soldiers armed with peculiar rifles and sashes filled with gleaming ammunition. Will's feet slipped out from under him as the walls around him trembled.

The soldiers in the dungeon were shouting and rushing past his door, followed by a barrage of bullets firing. Then there was silence.

Will clenched and unclenched his fists, watching the door to his cell. Finally the door swung open.

"Zeller!" Will called out, laughing in relief.

Brian Zeller clutched the key in his hand and rushed toward his friend.

"If you're through standing around," he sneered, "There's a revolution afoot."

Will staggered a bit after his wrists and neck were released. He looked up to see a woman in short brown hair carrying two gleaming mechanized rifles.

"Hello, Mongoose," she said with a bow, "I am the Architect."

"Pleasure," Will replied as she handed him one of the guns.

"Let me show you how to use that," she told him. "We are quickly eliminating the Kingsguard. You must hurry and find the king."

"Your Majesty!" the king's steward huffed as he entered his secret room in the east wing.

"What is it, Gregor?" Hannibal asked.

“Price and Crawford’s armies are attacking the palace. They’ve already broken the bastille and freed the prisoners.”

“What of the Kingsguard?”

“They are overcoming them,” Gregor replied. “Their troops are well-armed with some kind of infernal automatic rifles. And Your Majesty…”

Hannibal looked on the fear in his steward’s eyes.

“They have a monstrous machine that has been mowing down anyone who crosses its path.”

A thunderous crash broke out and the sounds of men shouting and weapons firing could be heard from the central wing of the palace.

“They’re here,” Gregor hissed.

“We must flee,” Hannibal commanded.

“We shall take the low road.”

“No,” Hannibal insisted. “We will take the merchant’s route.”

Hannibal and Gregor slipped out of the secret exit and made their way to the stables, all the while looking back at the commotion around the palace. They saddled two horses and bolted out the back way and toward the merchant road, a well-traveled path that was empty on this violent night.

As their horses sped over the crest of the hill and down again, the flames and lights from the city behind them no longer lit up the path. Gregor held forth his lantern and they journeyed onward, never decreasing their speed.

Suddenly, a horse and rider darted out in front of them. They came to a halt when they saw him raising a mechanized rifle in the air.

“Will,” Hannibal called when the light of the lantern fell upon the rider’s face. “Will you arrest me? Try me for ruling my own kingdom? Or will you assassinate me right here on this barren road?”

Will Graham drew close on his horse, and aimed his gun at Hannibal’s heart.

“There’s an armed barricade up ahead,” he spoke in a low voice. “The low road, the one I told you to take, that one is still safe.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed as he studied the young man. Then he lowered them and glanced at his steward.

“My Lord, it’s a trap,” Gregor whispered.

“I could just kill you both,” Will pointed out, patting his rifle. “Right here, on this barren road.”

Hannibal sighed and looked over his shoulder at the flickering lights on the horizon, and heard the sounds of cheering and trumpets blaring.

“Remarkable thing,” he said, turning back to Will. “My kingdom brought to its knees… by a whipping boy.”

Will lowered the gun and stared at the king, a lengthy inhale expanding his chest.

Hannibal continued, stroking the mane of his horse, “Someday one of us may be forced to kill the other.”

“Perhaps,” Will replied, “But today is not that day.”

He backed his horse away from the road and watched as Hannibal and Gregor cut through the forest toward the other path, the blinking light of their lantern growing dim in the distance and then disappearing.

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